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ABSTRACT

This paper represents a brief history of rural education in Fayette County (Texas) from 1918 through 1975. The paper focuses on the personal narratives of Harry Loeb, the last official superintendent of Fayette County and Emma Diedt, a 50-year Fayette County teacher. The narratives describe Fayette County schools, school politics, and the curriculum. Loeb relates the role of politics in the annexation and consolidation of school districts. Annexation was unpopular because the larger district could assume the smaller district without a vote. During this time annexation was common nationwide as school districts adapted to a declining population. Schools increasingly involved the Catholic church and its members as faculty; they also integrated minorities into teacher and student bodies. Diedt describes her education and her experience as a teacher in Fayette County schools. Consolidation and other educational decisions were under the heavy influence of politics. She describes her frustration in maintaining high academic standards when school administrators were emphasizing sports in school. Following the launching of Sputnik in 1957, the new focus in education was on math, science, and foreign language. (LP)

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An Oral Fayette County, Texas Rural School History: Perspectives of a County Superintendent and a Long-Time Teacher

by Mary Frances Linden

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Introduction

While much research in the history of education has focused on urban issues, this study is an attempt to fill in some of the gaps of rural schooling history. The local rural schools in Fayette County help to tell the story of rural America's development, heyday, and demise. Records show that the first Fayette County school was established when Texas was under the Mexican flag in 1834 three years after the official founding of the county in 1837 (Walling, 1941). From that time onward and prior to 1918, local pride in education can be seen in the operation of at least 82 rural public school districts, with separate affiliated African American schools, in addition to several parochial schools. Rural life here, as in other parts of the state and nation, centered around the many local country schools and churches. Two oral histories--that of the last official county superintendent of Fayette County, Mr. Harry Loeb, and that of Mrs. Emma Diedt, a fifty-year Fayette County teacher, describe Fayette County schools, school politics, and the curriculum. The details of their biographies will serve as the focus of this study of Fayette County rural schools from 1918-1975.

Loeb on a County in Transition

Harry Loeb served the longest term of any of the Fayette County superintendents--23 1/2 years from 1951-1974. In 1951, Mr. Loeb and Mr. Bloom prepared a chart mapping the status and destinations of the schools which had undergone annexations and consolidations. The numbers of the school districts decreased from 82 to nine. He said:

> When I came in, there were nine (rural school districts) in operation, and when I went out, there weren't any. They were all consolidated or either annexed to joining districts. Nine school districts, aside from the five that remain, were Svetlo, Cistern, Praha, Red Oak, Hostyn, Pecan, Fayetteville,

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> Round Top-Carmine, and a colored school in Mullins Prairie. The three independent school districts were La Grange, Schulenburg, and Flatonia. Fayetteville, Round Top-Carmine, Cistern, and Hostyn were classed as rural high schools.

Earlier, during the time that Loeb was coaching and high school principal in La Grange, a large annexation movement occurred in 1946. With one election, La Grange took in four districts. According to Loeb and the voting record, annexation elections were very unpopular, and they were very unfair to the people in the rural areas because the larger district could assume the smaller one without a vote. The consolidation issue was more favorable to the smaller district because a consolidation election had to carry in both districts. However, the Gilmer-Akin Bill became law during this time, and the smaller schools were done away with through annexations because of the money involved, and the shrinking rural population which had decreased school enrollments from 30-40 to 5-20 students. The following chart reveals a vote tally that demonstrated the unpopularity of the movement:

1946 Annexation Election

School	For	Against
La Grange ISD	238	7
Cedar Common School	2	22
Swiss Alp Com. Sc.	4	43
Washington Com Sc.	27	27

Politics of Failed Annexation Attempts

Although the Round Top-Carmine and Fayetteville districts still remain independent, there were several attempts to consolidate them. Loeb explains some of the politics that prevented the takeover:

> There was a move to consolidate the Round Top-Carmine and Fayetteville Districts at that time. However, the people from Fayetteville learned that if they consolidated with Round Top-Carmine (since they were both rural districts), regardless of what the trustees of Round Top-Carmine had told the trustees in the Fayetteville District, Round Top-Carmine would have jurisdiction, and they could put as many men or people on the board as they desired from that end of the county. The reason that they didn't go through with the consolidation was that a superintendent in Flatonia made a deal with the superintendent in Round Top- Carmine that he would become the principal of the newly created school district. Now there wasn't anything as where the high school or elementary school would be. They had a big meeting in Fayetteville, and I went down and explained the things that could happen, and they voted to stay on their own. Later, Round Top-Carmine was going to consolidate with Burton in Washington County. Burton had jurisdiction; the same thing happened, so they backed off; they remained an independent school district.

Depopulation and Geographic Annexations

Despite a few exceptions to the annexation trend, this phenomenon was occurring in Fayette County, as it was nationwide. Loeb said that back in the 1920's there were over 10,000 students in Fayette County, and in 1951, there were 6,001. From then on student numbers declined and leveled at 4000-5000 in 1971-72. This time period was when Schulenburg and La Grange became "large." Flatonia had fewer possibilities to annex much area because, "the Scott School was still open--Cistern was still out, Praha School was still out. And so they didn't get any except Pine Springs and a few of those out in that area."

County Line Districts

Sometimes determining the lines in an enlarged district was problematic. Loeb describes the process that often sent schools back and forth between counties as he looked at a disarray of

historical documents. Also evident in his discussion are more examples of county and local politics:

> Good Lord, this is stuff from 1956 that I signed, and they got it all out of order. This is establishing and redefining meets and bounds once a district is enlarged. This has to do with Spring Prairie and Bastrop County. You know when there are county line districts, both counties have to agree on it. We're the only county in the state of Texas that had county line districts. Wyldwood went to the Weimar Independent School District (Colorado County), which is now back in Fayette County. We had Ledbettter which went to Lee County. They are still in Lee County. We had Kirtley, which went to Smithville Independent School District; it's now back in Fayette County. We have St. John's over on the other side of Schulenburg, and it's back in Fayette County--the exception is Ledbetter. That's one of those deals that we were talking about. When Round Top-Carmine and Mr. Vanik got ready to file his petition for annexation, the people in Ledbetter and the people in Giddings in Lee County got together and called a consolidation election prior to his annexation, and the (consolidation) election carried, and Round Top-Carmine did not get to annex Ledbetter. There was no advantage except that the people just did not want to go to Carmine. That's sort of like Schulenburg and La Grange were at one time or Flatonia and Moulton, or Flatonia and Waelder. They didn't get along and they just didn't want to go to Carmine. Giddings was their trade area, and so they said, 'We'll annex to Giddings,' and that's where they are today.

Religion and Fayette County Schools

In addition to county and town political rivalries, Loeb also had some interesting insight into some religious politics in the towns and schools. Loeb stated that he thought he was the first Catholic to teach in La Grange Public School. The school board in the 1940's was predominantly Protestant, with no Catholics represented. However, he indicated that this had all changed during the years. Ironically even during his term, three rural schools did have nuns teaching in them--Pecan, Praha, and Hostyn. He elaborated on the Catholic presence in the schools:

> The schools that had the sisters teaching in them had strict instructions that no religion was to be taught during the day. There was never any religion taught in the schools by the sisters. In those schools in Praha and Hostyn, we leased the facilities from the Catholic Church. In Praha, we had a public school building, but we leased the Catholic facilities for $1.00 a year. What they did before and after school hours was strictly on their own. There wasn't any transportation provided in those schools. So they couldn't say they were teaching religion in those schools, because they had to find their own ways and means to get there. There was never any conflict with the state, who knew that we had nuns teaching in the schools. We were never called down.

Integration and Minorities in Fayette County

Just as many of the school policies were standard nationwide and statewide, so was segregation of African Americans in the Fayette County schools. There had been slaves in Fayette County in the mid-nineteenth century. During the time period in discussion, most of their descendants worked at laboring jobs in town, and only a few ever owned their own farms. Loeb said there were six "colored" schools in operation when he took office. A twelve grade school existed in Round Top, and Carmine had an eight grade facility. In La Grange, there was a black school called Randolph. One African American student moved to Cistern. According to Loeb, the trustees paid for her transfer and tuition to go to Smithville. There were no blacks in Praha. Loeb said that he used to get a phone call from Washington at least once a month about the black people in Praha, and he said that "he finally told the man to fly into Austin, and that (he) would take him to Cistern and Praha and he could see for himself (that) there just weren't any coloreds residing in the community." Loeb stated that he had never had to fire a colored teacher, but that he did not rehire one for padding attendance in a black school to protect her job. When the records verified small average attendance records, two black schools--Lane Pool and Tin Top were combined, and the one in Mullins Prairie was closed.

A suit was finally brought against La Grange to integrate the high school. Loeb summarizes that the litigant held that the facilities at Randoph School were inferior to those in La Grange. He

said that "black outsiders" were brought in from elsewhere and wanted to enroll. After the suit which La Grange won, they were soon allowed into the school. He did not remember exactly how integration was achieved, but he thought that it either took the black students a grade at a time or started with the elementary school.

Loeb indicated there was not a Mexican American community at that time either, except in Flatonia. But he emphasized that demographic changes have presently brought a large Mexican American population to La Grange.

Curriculum in La Grange

As far as the curriculum was concerned, Loeb iterated that the school in La Grange taught everything that was required when he was principal. The curriculum requirements included two years of math, two years of foreign language, four years of English, two years of social studies, two years of science. Home economics and vocational agriculture could be substituted for science. Electives included typing and shorthand. Driver education was required of all freshmen.

Diedt's and Northeast Fayette County's Schooling History

A second informant, Mrs. Emma Diedt, 85, taught school for fifty years in Fayette County. Researching, writing articles, designing her own curriculum, and writing and illustrating her own texts are just some of the accomplishments of this locally born, raised, and educated teacher. Her own school history mirrors the evolution of country schooling. She eventually went to college in San Marcos (which will be described later in this report.)

Born in La Bahia Prairie in 1907, Diedt was the oldest of eight children. When she was four years old, she started school at Carmine, which was about a half block from her family's store. She "would run down to the school" when she got tired of babysitting her little brother. Rather than hiring a primary teacher for the lower grades at that time, the

schools hired women from the community to teach the younger children. Because she knew the woman from the community who was teaching the primary grades, she was allowed to stay at school and participate with the other students. She laughingly said that Fayette County had arts and crafts, foreign language, a gifted program--all of which enabled her to be at school even when she was too young, and before those kinds of programs officially existed in the local schools. Although Diedt ranked first in her seventh grade class, she repeated the seventh grade in La Bahia, (even though her brothers and sisters went to Hill at that time) studying under a teacher who taught her many "tricks to remember information." Other schools that Diedt attended were hill, Round Top, and La Grange.

Diedt fondly reminisced about going to "declaim" for University Interscholastic League on the opposite side of the county in Flatonia in 1917. The students went on a car trip, had to board with Flatonia families, and went to a soda fountain, where she had her first ice cream soda. This bit of frivolity was offset by much description of the hardships--both economic and schooling that Diedt went through, as she fought to get an education against her family's wishes. Her words capture the tumult descriptively:

> (After the second time around at La Bahia), I got to go for two months to Round Top. And then I cried and got to go to La Grange...We were poor renters; we didn't stay very long any place. So we had to room and board here (in La Grange), and it was during 1923-'24. They were building the highway from Brenham to La Grange, and it was so wet. And they were making the highways with mules and prisoners, and making concrete, all by hand. Mixers and making the bridges and all that done by hand. We would have to go through peoples' pastures. One weekend, I even had to carry my suitcase from Oldenburg to Rutersville. That's where they met me. I cried and said, 'Please, just one more week, one more week." My baby sister was born on May 8, and we graduated on May 18--the first graduating class from the new school in La Grange, which is now the fire house.

Teaching History Mirrors Consolidation

Diedt started teaching in Round Top in 1925 after passing the county teacher's exam. She taught 65 students and therefore got paid $65 a month. There were often problems getting their checks cashed in La Grange if the money from the state had not cleared. Consequently, the teachers would get three dollars docked out of their money. At that time she taught for seven months, "which was a long term." Her teaching philosophies and practices become apparent in her description of her early teaching experiences:

> (After Round Top, I) went to Rock Hill, then to Oldenburg, and Warrenton. Then we consolidated thirteen districts, and we brought in the buildings at Round Top Church. Of course, the three-room Round Top School was there. We brought in four more two-room and one one-room (buildings) and put them side by side. And that became the Round Top Elementary School. I became the principal teacher; my brother was the primary teacher. We had six brothers and sisters going to school--can you imagine eight of us Kiels' going there in the morning. I took the first graders; I wouldn't let him have the first graders. I put them in my big room because I felt they needed a good foundation. I didn't believe in this business 'anybody could teach them.' And some of my first graders at Oldenburg say that I even taught nine times tables in the first grade. That may not be true because you were in there with all the students. They just heard it, and they learned it. But they could have; I may have made them learn them. I don't think these days that we teach the kids enough.

School Politics and a Growing Emphasis on Sports

Diedt was principal at the Round Top Elementary School for 17 years After consolidation, she supervised six teachers during 1945-1959. Her duties also included running the lunchroom. Her success at making a profit in the lunchroom was attributable to planning, wise shopping, and cooperation between the school and the community. She even had a system whereby the students could work clearing the brush and chopping and pulling weeds around the school in exchange for meals. Her efficiency eventually was her downfall. Although some of her description is indirect, the following quote captures her virtue and determination to maintain high ethical and academic

standards in her school even when the school administration had its own designs on lunch room money:

> At that time, we had seven teachers; that was from 1945-1959. It was 1959, when I came back to La Grange; I got fired. Mr. Kerr (was) the superintendent at Carmine, and I was at (the) elementary. He didn't believe in some of the stuff I was doing, and I didn't believe in some of the stuff that he was doing. He believed in athletics--little league. If it's a good and sunshiny day. instead of the one-half hour play period which they were supposed to have, to really work and do exercise, he would let them be out there an hour--an hour and a half. It doesn't make any difference. I said, 'These are our farm kids; they have got chores to do after they get home; they get plenty of sunshine. They need to be in the classroom. As long as I'm principal, I am going to see that they get there. '
>
> And then we started kindergarten. We needed tables and chairs.You see, I was keeping the lunch records for Round Top, and we were making money at ten and fifteen cents a meal, because I would buy vegetables. We even started out that first year with everybody bringing a plate, a fork, a spoon, and a glass. Can you imagine what a conglomeration of dishes we had? And milk. They would come with half-gallon jars that they had milked in the morning. And then I gave them credit for it. Later on, we brought in a whole lot of land, and it was just reeds and underbrush. If they wanted to chop and pull weeds fifteen minutes, they could get a free lunch. We had little cards with 30 numbers on them, and if they ate there--they paid for the card--like $3.00 a card and if they ate, then I'd punch the card. If they brought their lunch, why then they weren't charged that day. Or if they worked that morning, they weren't charged for that meal. And we still made money.
>
> Well, he, (Mr. Kerr) wanted us to buy the tables and chairs for the kindergarten. I said, 'Well, I could call it, if the inspectors ever came. So I put down tables and chairs, and I didn't identify it as a kindergarten experience. Well, we didn't have enough tables and chairs, so it was for the lunchroom. But then, he came after the high school team got first place in

> the region, and they were going to state, and he wanted me to buy basketball uniforms for the high school team--basketball team out of Round Top lunch room (money). So he convinced the board that I wasn't cooperating with him, which I wasn't. So I came to La Grange.

Sputnik, National Influence on Curriculum, and Ability Grouping

After being fired from Round Top, Diedt taught fifth grade one year in La Grange. The Russians put Sputnik up in 1957 putting new curricular pressures on schools nationally. The new focus on math, science, and foreign language affected the Fayette County schools and had a direct influence on Diedt's teaching assignment. She explained the circumstances in the following account:

> He called three of us teachers in. The high school teacher had already been teaching German. We chose German, because most people; most of the people were of German descent. Instead of it being elective in high school, everybody had to take it. This was in the La Grange School in 1959.; Mr. Apple was the superintendent. Anyway, he got three of us in there. I was to have primary. Here we had six grades, four sections of each grade.
>
> And we did all of the good students--ability grouping even then. And they still do to this day--they get by with it in lots of way. And I believe in it. Because the A students, B students, and C students (were altogether). There was no stigma connected. It just meant that these students had more time to do it, and they didn't keep the others back and so on. They weren't under that stress, but I found in foreign language, that they could do as well as A students could. So here I was with a little pushcart, tape recorder, and overhead projector, with tapes that we bought--we bought a few.

Speaking German was not a new concept to Diedt, nor was studying foreign language. She said that when she was in second grade, she got put in a fourth grade German class, much to the dismay of the fourth grade student with whom she had to share a desk. She emphasized that the whole school was bilingual. According to her, the students never knew if they answered in

German or English, and so the teacher spoke both. They were attempting to get the students to speak English indirectly. School and home reinforcement of the two languages enabled Diedt to grow up bilingual. She elaborates:

> I learned German at home. We didn't know English until we got to school. La Grange had changed by then. Even after WWII when I was teaching in Oldenburg, if I heard them speaking German, I had to punish them, because that was required. During World War I everybody at Carmine, everybody was German. Dr. Beyers wife was from New Orleans, and Mr. Alex Meiners' wife was from the north, but we didn't bother until a stranger came. Then we were careful.
>
> I had been the oldest grandchild of the Eichler family. And my grandpa would take me on his lap, and he taught me all those German little songs and verses. I was like a little puppet. And I'd show off. And here I could use all of that. So I used the family unit and then kept on with others. But that's how I started. I had to make up my own curriculum. I have here what we had to write. that year. And I've written quite a few articles, and most of my things are about German. *Vas ist das?* And it tells the story of our German program in here. Coach Miller's son and Faith Schmidt--they all have children who are in school. That is when they were in kindergarten.
>
> Then in 1963, they had this National Education Defense Act, in which you could apply, and you would go to different places in the United States, and learn the language. I got to go to Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was really too old, but Dr. Smith, (I had his sons in the German class) wrote, 'She might be too old, but don't be surprized if she'll be at the head of the pack.' And so I got to go, and then the next summer in 1964, they selected 64 of those people from all over the United States to go to Germany, so I got to spend the whole summer and by the way Minneapolis, Minnesota gave me credit for 18 hours, and the next year, it was from California--Stanford. These were teachers, people who had written books, it was just wonderful. So I got to go there. But the trouble was--this is why I had started my master's, but I did this, and I had so many hours, but I didn't have the number of hours at one place.

Evident from her background, Diedt felt that knowledge acquisition was of the utmost importance.She feels that that children are not learning enough nowadays. She explained that all students are learning is to fill in a little blank or underline something, and that they are unable to see a sentence with a question mark or a period or an exclamation mark. She bragged that she had taught her third graders what a square root was, and that during a game show that came on in the evenings that parents were impressed that their children could do square roots.

Identification With the Greater American Community

The following conversation captures Diedt's higher education studies and her career decisions during hard times in the United States. When she started her university studies in 1928 in San Marcos, Texas, she shared the same English program with Lyndon Baines Johnson. Her identification with the larger American community is evident as she discussed her family's practice of naming children after presidential children. Unlike the children of the political elites, the limitations of Diedt's family life and finances were determinant in some of her career choices that left her ambitions to do scientific research unfulfilled. Undaunted, her American values, determination, and her uncanny ability to make money in the height of the Great Depression enabled her survival and success. Highlights surface in the following discussion:

> Now in 1928, when I started school, Lyndon Johnson and I shared the same English teacher. He had the 7:00 class, and I had the 8:00 class. Now included in this was debate. So he and Milton Richardson who later became a judge at MacAllen won in the 7:00 class, and Celeste Gilley and I won in the 8:00. The theme was 'Are movies detrimental to the young people?' Can you imagine? This was way in 1928. It took me until 1942--by the way I was majoring in chemistry and minoring in physics.

This identification with national political leaders was not the first time in Diedt's life that the presidents were close to her family. Her colorful account holds that all of the children in her

family were named after children of the presidents She said that she was named after Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, then another child after Garfield's child, then Monroe's, Wilson's and so on.In spite of traditional practices such as these in her family, Diedt had some untraditional goals and experiences and some which reflected her traditional ties to rural life. She said:

> It took me until 1942 (to graduate)--by the way I was majoring in chemistry and minoring in physics. We got pregnant. We got married in 1931. We were at San Marcos. We were stuck there. All of our funds--we couldn't draw a check, write a check; here we were stuck with a flour sack full of cookies, tea cakes that I had made for us to nibble on. That was about all we had for a week until we were able to get home on the farm, and get eggs, chicken, and all of that.
>
> I was making a living setting peoples' hair for 25 cents. I cooked this gook from linseed oil that I'd buy at the pharmacy. I would do it all in waves.
>
> Then later on, after WW II, I changed over to elementary education. I got married. He was baling hay, and we had bought a hay baler, and I changed to elementary education. And of course, everyone had to have general science. You had those four--physics, chemistry, botany, and zoology
>
> I had had that chemistry. I could balance equations--qualitative and quantitative analysis. We had that in freshman; they later changed it to senior class requirements. So here I stood at the door every afternoon holding my hand out, and each one of them gave me a dime. I had 50-60 of these elementary teachers that could come and sit down, and then I would explain to them what that chemistry teacher had said that morning. I made five, six dollars a day. Boy that was money in those days. This was in San Marcos, and the army called him back in the reserves, and my gravy train was over. I had to quit. Then they didn't require that anymore.
> I was going to go into chemical research in 1928. Can you believe it? But you never know. I have had so many honors as a German teacher.

Integration in Northeast Fayette County and La Grange

Diedt described a poignancy associated with the education of the few African American students in Fayette County.

> First of all, the poor blacks had very little chance--first of all we had very few blacks in that area. At Oldenburg, we did have a black school there, and at Round Top, there was what had originally been the black school. Then, when we consolidated, we built a new black school, and here they ran buses. and they might have five or six children. It was just pitiful. Even at that time, I would invite the black teachers over to our faculty meetings sometimes. So we needed to do something about integration. La Grange integrated the whole thing at one time. La Grange was the first district that had ever been sued--(by) a black family that moved in here.
>
> La Grange won the case because they proved that they had equality of schools. Then it came to where we had to integrate. Most schools just integrated one grade.. Mr. .Apple made all of the black school junior high, and he brought all of the high school to the high school, and the elementary school to the elementary.
>
> And I was put on duty for the sixth grade when we were dismissed because we felt that the elementary sixth graders might be the most problem. Well, here this boy walked past me, and he had his cap on. We had a rule about kids wearing hats inside, I don't care where it is. I said,'Take the cap off until you get outside.' And he went ahead and took it off, and when he was past me, he put it back on again. I just went right by him, took him by the arm, took him to the office, gave him three licks, and said, 'Okay, when a teacher tells you to do something, that means you do it.' We didn't know that he was the ringleader, but we never had any problems with blacks at the elementary school.
>
> Integration was fine. We never had any problems. They had good teachers. We still have some of those teachers that are teaching right now at elementary school who were teachers (in the black school) when integration took place. They belonged to the white Church of Christ. and so on. And

one lives up in Austin--Paula McFall, and Roberta Moore was another one--she died. Also, the organist--she plays piano. Next to the funeral home, the woman who lives there was a teacher.

Conclusion

This text has attempted to capture the local color of two dedicated and influential educators' experiences in the contexts of their small town and rural Fayette County, Texas environment. As in most parts of the country, rural schools were forced to change beginning in the Progressive Era and continued to do so through the 1950's. Despite the microcosmic view of people, places, and events, we have seen that the bigger picture of the national political economy was influencing the bureaucratization and centralization of life in the countryside. Issues such as curriculum, national defense, emphasis on English as the main language, and integration were felt in the small communities no less than in the urban centers of the United States. These two oral histories help us to understand what was once a similar educational experience for the majority of Americans before the impulse to urbanization and industrialization, just prior to the turbulence of the 1960's and the dawn of a new technological era.